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How Fascism Went Digital: A Historian's Perspective on Bolsonaro's Victory in Brazil

Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the Brazilian presidential election marks the triumph of a new, digital form of totalitarian movement in which masses are the driver of their own manipulation. But this doesn't make it less harmful than traditional fascist models.

Geschrieben von [Antoine Acker](#) am 7. November 2018

It is a fact that Jair Bolsonaro, who has triumphantly been elected president of Brazil with more than 55% of the vote, has publicly approved torture, regretted that his country's former dictatorship did not kill enough people, and wished Brazil a civil war with 30,000 dead so as to regenerate itself. But does this make him the leader of a fascist movement? Some historians have argued that this "imported" denomination overlooks the continuity of a domestic tradition of authoritarianism, and especially, the unresolved heritage of the military regime which ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. Indeed, the elected president is a former military officer trained during this period and has never hidden his nostalgia for this regime. But while the latter was a peculiar mix of state oppression and controlled electoral processes that included a limited opposition, Brazil also has its own, authentic fascist tradition.

In the 1930s, it was home to the world's second Nazi party, which was affiliated to Hitler's NSDAP and attracted members from, but also beyond, the country's German colony. Another movement, the "Brazilian Integralist Action", emerged in the same decade to defend a national order based on catholic, rural and masculine values. It openly claimed its lineage with Italian fascism, as well as including a strong antisemitic current. With a membership of over one million persons, in a country of about thirty-five million, it became Brazil's largest mass movement. Bolsonaro's personal and ideological story is intertwined with the modern heritage of these interwar experiences. His friendship with the neo-Nazi Marco Antônio Santos, who

posed with him dressed as Hitler following an invitation to the Rio de Janeiro city council by Bolsonaro's son (himself a city councilor), is well known. Bolsonaro's campaign slogan, "Brasil acima de tudo" is a literal translation of "Deutschland über alles" (except for the country's name). This is not just a coincidence, but a watchword imported to Brazil in 1969 by the "Nativist Spark" (*Centelha Nativista*). The latter was a group at the radical fringe of the military, fascinated by Nazi symbols, pushing for more hardline authoritarianism and whose influence survived the democratic transition thanks to political personalities like the newly elected president.

Troubling resemblances with interwar Europe

Elements that previously precluded a description of the Brazilian military dictatorship as "fascist" are now represented in the discourse and practices of Bolsonaro's movement. Such elements include the cult of personality of "the myth" – as his partisans call him – and an aesthetics of violence symbolized in the first place by the "Bolsonarist" sign of identification, which consists in miming shooting with both hands. It is troubling how pictures of Brazilian mobs pointing their hands in the air as if these were revolvers recall the collective mimicry of the fascist salute. Their candidate's call to "fusillade" the members of the Workers Party (PT) and the threat of one of his elected deputies to "shoot" left-wing members of Rio de Janeiro's state assembly are also in line with the fascist conception of the political competitor as an enemy to be exterminated. While Bolsonaro has no structured militia, a portion of his most fervent supporters have behaved like Mussolini's Blackshirts, committing hundreds of acts of physical violence (including at least three assassinations) against PT campaigners, homosexuals, transsexuals and indigenous people. Swastikas as well as graffiti and bills threatening the murder of black and LGBT+ Brazilians were displayed on the streets, within schools and even on the walls of churches, creating a climate of intimidation during the polls.

Bolsonaro's campaign itself was based on the manipulation of the masses through a large-scale industry of "fake news" that circulated on social networks such as Whatsapp and Facebook, slandering left candidates and leaders with accusations of corruption, the sexualization of children, rape and even Satanism. It produced a culture of moral denunciation and political persecution recalling the darkest hours of interwar Europe. Immediately after Bolsonaro's victory a congresswoman from his party invited secondary school students to use their cellp-

hones in the classroom to film teachers practicing “leftist indoctrination”. The general hostility towards the “reds” has turned into a totalitarian delirium, with even Francis Fukuyama being abhorred as a “communist”, and people in the street being attacked simply for wearing red clothes. This witch hunt against the left – a word emptied of its actual political meaning – has taken the form of an irrational search for scapegoats for the economic crisis, with troubling resemblance to the first historical stage of fascist harassment against religious and ethnic minorities.

Admittedly, there are also good reasons in being cautious before attributing “Bolsonarism” (let us call it that way until the debate is settled) a fascist label. Bolsonaro does not possess Hitler’s dogmatic substance, and his approximative syntax shows him far from Mussolini’s famous writing skills and capacities of intellectual articulation. He is another avatar of the enigmatic international success of far-right figures (Italy’s Matteo Salvini, France’s Marine Le Pen, and USA’s Donald Trump), whose mediocre appearance and unpolished language contrast sharply with the rhetorical sophistication of traditional fascist leaders. Another notable difference in the current Brazilian situation is the absence of a mass party – the Social Liberal Party (PSL), which Bolsonaro only joined in March 2018, was just one of the few small groups which offered to make him their presidential candidate. Only during the final days of the campaign did it grow to become Brazil’s second political party, and it still lacks the structured rituals and militarized organization of historical fascist movements. Finally, Bolsonarism does not seem to display pretensions of territorial expansion in the way European fascisms did. But this latter point must be discussed in the geographic context of Brazil, a country of 8.5 million square kilometers whose vast interior has always been considered by local authoritarian movements as a huge void to be conquered and brought into submission, in order for the nation to survive and grow. Hence Bolsonaro’s promises to amplify deforestation and dismantle indigenous territories could be as well interpreted as a tropical version of *Lebensraum*.

Why historians should mind the very short term

While this geographic context can help situate the PSL’s political platform as a “brazilianized” variation of fascism, the historical context of the present always remains somewhat harder to grasp for historians. Most of the profession had seen the authoritarian drift of Brazilian institu-

tions coming since the unconstitutional impeachment of elected President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, but the result of the first presidential round caught everyone by surprise. A week before, Bolsonaro was still not the favorite, and most of the progression which led him to 46% of the vote was built in the last forty-eight hours. Of course, there are long and medium term explanations for this rise, and these belong to the kind of causalities historians are used to dealing with. Such strands are the spirit of revenge of a reactionary elite whose prosperity lies on the structural heritage of slavery, the socially downgrading power of the harsh economic decline of the past four years, and the collapse of the political system amidst huge corruption scandals. The growing adhesion of evangelical priests to Bolsonaro's project of restoring a patriarchal family order also played a significant role towards the end of the campaign. Their influence is itself the result of fifty years of local community presence in socially segregated neighborhoods, under the auspices of churches which have been able to appropriate the tools of the entertainment industry and digital world to propagate their dogma.

But these historical developments do not suffice to explain the electoral *Blitzkrieg* that took place in many parts of Brazil, for example in the state of Rio de Janeiro where support for Bolsonaro's hard-line ally and candidate for governor Wilson Witzel grew from 14% (in the poll most favorable to him) to 41% in less than twenty-four hours. What historians have not been able to detect is the power of digital technologies to duplicate and accelerate the effects of social and political evolutions, which the profession is not trained to analyze in such a short timeframe. According to data published on October 28 by the polling institute Datafolha, 65% of Brazilian voters acknowledged having informed themselves politically through "news" received on Whatsapp, and 47% admitted to believing these news items.

The rise of a digital, "on the spot" fascism

In this context, Bolsonaro's campaign was able to invent a new form of fascism, of which social networks were the birthplace. The stunning rapidity with which lies could spread digitally made the fascist mass party as an instrument to manipulate society obsolete. To be sure, this operation was patiently planned from the top, as shown by the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, [which revealed on 18 October](#) how hundreds of businessmen involved themselves in massive electoral fraud at the service of the PSL. In complete illegality, companies paid up to four million dollars each to acquire users' data, to create Whatsapp groups and bombard millions of private

accounts with defamation of PT candidates. But the point is, once such a poison is introduced into the digital world, mass manipulation quickly becomes a participative process powered by the masses themselves. Through their cell phones, Brazilians distractedly forwarded to their relatives, friends and colleagues, "fake news" fabricated to influence their vote, amidst a flow of emoticons, personal messages, and other, non-political information. This construction of an "on the spot" fascism, rendered fluid by means of interactivity, may also dispense Bolsonaro and his clique from constructing a governmental apparatus of surveillance and repression in the future. As the Brazilian journalist Fausto Salvadori wrote [in one of the best analyses produced after the second round](#), who needs censorship and a political police when school students film teachers with their cell phones? And, perhaps in an attempt to envisage the worst case scenario, one could add – who needs planned techniques of state violence, when hundreds of thousands of anonymous "trolls" use the internet to propagate calls for raping or murdering members of ethnic and sexual minorities? – as has happened in the past weeks.

For similar reasons, the traditional fascist orator also has no reason to be in the world of social networks, in which communication consists in quick sentences, sometimes with a strictly limited number of signs (Twitter), and a language cleansed from syntactical complexities. Digital rhetoric does not produce charismatic tribunes, but "influencers", who speak everyday language, make themselves noted by provocative declarations creating "buzz", and stage themselves through Instagram pictures and live videos made from their hospital room or their home sofa, as in the case of Bolsonaro during the campaign. As classical historians of fascism have pointed out, there can be many kinds of fascist movements. Bolsonarism is the first to take a digital form. But this does not make it less totalitarian in its project of political persecution, as became clear in the PSL [leader's almost surrealistic speech on October 22](#). While the speech was attended by thousands of supporters on São Paulo's main avenue, the candidate addressed the mob virtually, filmed by a cellphone as he was standing in random home dress in a place which seemed to be the laundry room of his personal residence. The speech content, however, belonged to fascism of the most gruesome kind, especially as Bolsonaro intimated to his political opponents to "leave the country or go to prison" and promised to "send them all to *Ponta da Praia*" (a military base which functioned as a center of torture during the dictatorship).

Now is time to apply the fascist label

Since the late 1980s, the emergence of right-wing populism in Europe's electoral landscape has led to an increasing use of the "fascist" comparison in politics and the media. Many historians thought to compensate for common exaggerations by applying the fascist label to contemporary movements strictly sparingly. Now is the time to use this label again, for Bolsonaro is not just the "Trump of the tropics". He champions far-right totalitarianism, but in a context of digital connectivity that makes dictatorial plans much less discernable than in the time when these used to be embodied by traditional fascist structures. To recognize Bolsonarism as digital fascism is not a matter of academic jargon, but of using an adequate historical comparison that informs us about the risks of what is currently happening: fascism produces bloodshed, especially when the international community fails to identify it in its early stage.

[Dieser Artikel ist auch auf Deutsch verfügbar](#)

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